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Back to Bipolarity?

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A decade after the Berlin Wall was torn down and a new international system was born, the nature of that new system is not yet clear. It is a fluid and complex system that remains in evolution. But an evolution toward what? The past can tell us something about what might happen in the future if historical patterns can be discerned and applied to today's world. History shows that the fluidity in today's world has precedents in the early stages of each of the past five international systems. Each of those previous systems had a life cycle: there was a tendency for fluidity and multipolarity to turn into rigidity and bipolarity, with that bipolarity in turn resulting in large scale conflict (or a Cold War) and the demise of the existing international system. Most of the past systems developed before or during the Industrial Age. There are signs that history may be repeated in the Information Age—and it may be moving into a more bipolar and more dangerous stage.

Five International Systems

Five international systems have existed since the birth of the United States. We are now less than a decade into a sixth. Most of the previous systems, though Eurocentric, have tended to dominate world politics and they have become increasingly global. The five systems are summarized below. In each case, a trend toward a bipolar division and conflict can be seen.

First System: The Treaty of Utrecht to Waterloo

The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 ended the War of Spanish Succession and ushered in a new international system based upon what may be called a loose balance of power. The early system was multipolar, with a number of nations forming temporary relationships with one another and with wars fought for limited purposes. In northern Europe, Russia (after Peter the Great) and Prussia (after Frederick the Great) were in ascendancy as Swedish power faded, and these two new powers became rivals. In southern Europe, France and Austria were rivals. As a result, Russia and Austria seemed to be logical allies, along with Great Britain which needed a counterweight to France. Russia and Austria together fought four small wars against France and its allies between 1733 and 1748. These alliances were not permanent and, as the diplomatic revolution of 1756 demonstrated, the system remained fluid. During the Seven Years War (1756-1763), alliances shifted as France, Austria, and Russia fought together against Great Britain and Prussia. Furthermore, Russia and Prussia found common interest in the progressive partition of Poland later in the century, and they both stayed neutral as France and Great Britain fought in the War of the American Revolution. It was during the Seven Years War and the American Revolution, however, that a firmer bipolarity began to take shape centered on Great Britain and France. As Napoleon's power grew

at the turn of the century, he was still able to form fluid alliances on the continent to isolate and defeat his enemies. The system became tightly bipolar when Britain, Russia and their allies united against an aggressive and republican France. This clash culminated in the battles of Borodino, Leipzig and Waterloo, where the first system ended.

Second System: Congress of Vienna to the Crimean War

A new Concert of Europe was born in Vienna in 1815 ushering in the second international system which was based upon a balance of power designed to prevent a hegemon from arising again on the continent. Great Britain acted independently as the balancer, contributing to the fluidity of the system. For example, when Austria grew concerned about Russia's policy in the Near East, the Austrians turned to Britain for help. When Russia distrusted Prussian intentions in the Baltic states, the Tsar also turned to Britain. The outlines of an underlying bipolarity existed in the system with liberal France and Britain leading in the west and conservative Russia, Prussia, and Austria dominating the east. Generally these ideological differences did not override the flexibility needed to make the Concert of Europe work. The Concert system kept the peace for much of the first half of the 19th Century, with most of the conflict recorded between Russia and Turkey on the periphery. The Revolutions of 1848, however, began to erode the anti-hegemonic cohesion that made the system work. A new generation of ambitious leaders amplified the underlying ideological bipolarity of the system. Conservative Russia's interference in the internal affairs of Balkan states proved unacceptable to liberal Britain and France. The second system thus ended with the Crimean War.

Third System: The Rise of Germany to World War I

The period between the Crimean War and World War I best illustrates the turn toward bipolarity in the evolution of an international system. The third system began in a multipolar and very fluid fashion. Prussia's Otto von Bismarck was a master manipulator and used the diplomatic freedom allowed by the new system to his advantage. In preparing for war with Denmark over Schleswig and Holstein, Bismarck first secured the support of Austria. In preparing for war with Austria, he secured France's neutrality. In preparing for war with France, he convinced Russia to deploy forces in such a way as to insure Austria's neutrality. Together, his victories ensured German unification. After Bismarck's successful wars, he designed a complex set of secret treaties that put Germany at the center of a web of agreements with Russia, Britain, Austria, and Italy; and they effectively isolated France. This flexible set of relationships continued until 1890 when Kaiser Wilhelm II replaced Bismarck. Without him, Germany was unable to manage the informal and complex alliance system. The formation of the Triple Entente and the Central Powers Alliance in the early 1900s created a more rigid bipolar system, in which each cluster of allies drew together for fear of isolation. Commitments were reinforced, armies were strengthened, war plans were made more automatic, and conflict became almost inevitable.

Fourth System: The Interwar Period

World War I and the collapse of monarchies throughout much of Europe led the Allies to create in 1919 a more formal, global version of a basic security structure that had brought a degree of peace to Europe in the early 19th Century. Instead of an informal Concert system with a semi-independent balancer, they created a League of Nations with a formal Assembly, a Council, and a Secretariat. Consistent with the older Concert system, however, states agreed to provide for collective security by aligning themselves against a potential aggressor. The point is that a fluid arrangement was created which sought to provide security without rigid alliances. The League experiment with collective security failed because countries like the United States, the Soviet Union, and, until 1926, Germany were not members; and, because strict enforcement measures proposed by the French were not adopted. The League of Nations system

also came apart because of domestic unrest, in this case caused by the Great Depression and the totalitarianism that followed. During the 1930s, the world polarized into two rigid camps of Axis dictatorships and Allied democracies, with the United States remaining formally neutral. Weakness in the Allied camp plus a shift in the bipolar balance due to the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was enough to convince Hitler that achieving victory through aggression would work. World War II ended the fourth system.

Fifth System: The Cold War

The post-war security system, formed in part at the Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco Conferences, was the creation of the United States and its Allies who were determined to use their "second chance" to get it right. They created a new global collective security system embodied in the United Nations that once again relied for the maintenance of security not on rigid alliances but on the fluid alignment of nations in the Security Council. Its failing was the requirement for Big Five unanimity for any military action, and its saving grace was Article 51 of the Charter which reinforced the right to individual and collective self-defense. The early multipolarity of this fifth system lasted only a few years as the United States moved to counter Soviet aggression; by April 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was created consistent with Article 51. Bipolarity was formalized in 1955 with West Germany's incorporation into NATO and the formation of the Warsaw Pact, and it was progressively globalized with a string of U.S. security arrangements from Latin America to Japan. There were elements of economic and ideological multipolarity in play during the Cold War, but from a strategic nuclear and military perspective, the international system was fundamentally bipolar.

Lessons from this History

Some lessons from this history may provide guidance for diplomacy today. One overall lesson is that, like complex biological systems, international systems appear to go through life cycles with a birth, flexibility in youth, more rigidity as the system matures, and a demise.

International systems tend to last two to three generations, although the fourth (interwar) system lasted but one. Large scale conflicts have created them and have ended them. The War of Spanish Succession, Napoleon's defeat, the Crimean War, World War I and World War II each gave birth to a new system. Only the transition from the fifth to the sixth system escaped this tendency because nuclear weapons created too dangerous a prospect for major war. Post-war treaties or conferences have created organizational structures, institutions, and rules to initiate three of the emerging systems (the second, fourth, and fifth).

Each of these five systems was initially multipolar rather than bipolar. Multipolarity made them more complex; movement in the system was relatively fluid; and state diplomacy could be flexible. In some cases this multipolar fluidity was manifested in specific institutions. In the Concert of Europe, for example, the major powers were supposed to be flexible in order to counter a potential hegemon. The League of Nations and United Nations further institutionalized the concept of collective security in which nations would align themselves against any aggressor that might appear. In other historical cases, multipolar fluidity was set in a system without international mechanisms or organizations. This allowed Napoleon and Bismarck to isolate their enemies.

As each of the five previous systems matured, a degree of bipolarity set in. This was most prominent in the 20th Century with the rigid sets of alignments that eventually fought in World Wars I and II and with the bipolarity of the Cold War. But a similar phenomenon occurred when major powers aligned against

France early in the 19th Century and again against Russia at mid-century.

In at least four of the five systems, bipolarity had ideological underpinnings. Common interests bound the parties in all cases. The systems became more rigid either as a result of political turmoil or because of the use of force by either alliance.

In some cases, the rigidly bipolar phase occurred late in the system's life cycle. That was particularly true for the first two historical systems. In the case of the Cold War, it occurred early and lasted for decades. In every case it led to confrontation and in all but the last it resulted in a system-changing war. Bipolarity was not the only factor that produced major conflict, but it provided a structure for it and appears to have made conflict more likely.

Consequences for the Sixth System

The first decade of the sixth system repeats the early pattern in which relations among the major actors are once again more fluid. Its characteristics have been difficult to describe simply, and so far it still bears the title "Post Cold-War Era." Indeed, it will be difficult to give it a proper title until the system matures and its longer-term characteristics become evident.

This sixth system has had five categories of actors and four dominant trends, with each trend affecting these actors in different ways. This accounts for much of the complexity apparent in the new system. The dominant actors are the *market democracies*. Their ideology has become the global model and by the end of the decade, 117 of the world's 191 nations are characterized as democracies. The United States remained the leader of the adapting alliances of market democracies and for a moment the international system appeared unipolar as the U.S. engagement policy made American influence felt globally. States in *transition* constitute a second group that hopefully are moving toward market democracies. The most important of these transition states are China, Russia, and India. Their ultimate orientation may be the most important determinant of how the more mature system will look.

The third category of states consists of the so-called *rogues* or rejectionist states: notably Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya, the Sudan, Cuba, and now Serbia. Containing their activities became the prime focus of U.S. defense policy for most of the sixth system's first decade and defeating two of them, nearly simultaneously, became the sizing function for U.S. military forces. A fourth category includes the *failing states*: Bosnia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Algeria, Somalia, and Haiti, to name just a few. Managing humanitarian disasters inherent in their failure has occupied most of America's foreign policy attention during the decade. Finally, non-state actors have begun to take on many state characteristics. Some support the market democracies, such as global companies; some prey on them, like international crime syndicates; and some seek to bring the market democracies down, for example terrorist organizations. This article considers only *transnational outlaws*.

Four worldwide trends have had both positive and negative effects on these five categories of actors, pulling some together and pushing others apart. The general result has been an increasing degree of polarization in international politics. The table below summarizes this effect.

The rapid *globalization* of events is based on new information technology and has increased the pace of events in economics, politics and military affairs. Economic globalization has brought unprecedented wealth to most market democracies (the Asian downturn notwithstanding), and it continues to attract transition states and to empower transnational outlaws. But rogue states tend to reject the cultural and some economic aspects of globalization, while the failing states are not reaping its benefits at all and fall

further behind. *Democratization* has had a similar effect. It can provide for peaceful transfers of power and attracts transition states like India, Russia, and South Africa. But it has deepened fissures within many failing states as ethnic, tribal, or religious groups simply vote with their group.

Fragmentation has ironically been stimulated by globalization as groups seek to differentiate themselves in a globalized world and to maximize power at the local level. This devolution of power is a phenomenon found nearly everywhere in the world today, but it has a very different impact on different actors. In market democracies, it has led to generally positive outcomes such as greater powersharing with state governments in the United States and the concept of "subsidiarity" (decisions made at lowest possible level) in the European Union. In some market democracies with particularly difficult ethnic balances (e.g., Canada, Belgium, and Spain), the democratic process has provided safeguards for minorities and the means to resolve disputes. However, in the most important transition states (e.g., Russia, China, and India), fragmentation has led to armed conflict (Chechnya, Xinjiang, and Kashmir) or continued tension (Tibet). This in turn has led to additional political problems between these transition states and the market democracies. Fragmentation along ethnic lines is now the leading cause of state failure. It provides new opportunities for transnational criminal and terrorist organizations.

| Impact of Trends on Actors | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------|
| | Globalization | Democratization | Fragmentation | Proliferation |
| Market Democracies | + | + | +/- | - |
| Transition States | + | + | - | +/- |
| Rogue States | - | - | - | + |
| Failing States | - | - | - | ? |
| Transnational Outlaws | + | ? | + | + |
| | + Positive Impact | - Negative Impact | ? Unknown Impact | |

Preventing and countering the *proliferation* of weapons of mass destruction has been a national priority for the United States throughout the early years of this sixth international system. Many of the other market democracies are only now awakening to its dangers. Proliferation gives rogue states and even some non-governmental groups the ability to threaten and possibly deter U.S. policies. It is no surprise that the issue has dominated U.S. relations with North Korea and Iraq. The impact of proliferation on the large transition states has been mixed, because China and Russia both

supply technology and are also threatened by it. India is one of the principal proliferators. Proliferation remains a problem between the United States and the key transition states.

Given the evident polarizing impact of these four worldwide trends, one must ask whether the life cycle of the sixth international system is also moving in the direction of eventual bipolarity. A look at recent relations among the major powers tends to confirm this possibility.

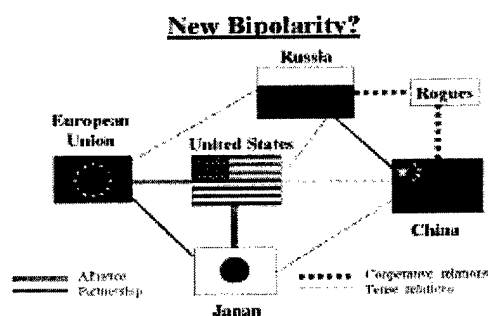
The figure to the right depicts current relationships among the five major global powers. The United States is adapting and reinforcing its security alliances with Europe and Japan. At the same time, U.S. security relations with both Russia and China have been badly frayed during the past year. There are major differences with Russia over NATO enlargement, missile defense, proliferation, and Caspian Sea oil. The war between NATO and Serbia has dramatically increased these tensions. There are also major differences with China over Taiwan, Tibet, theater missile defense, human rights, espionage, and economic policy.

As a result, China and Russia are strengthening their security relationship with each other, overcoming countervailing factors which might otherwise prevent a closer collaboration. The attraction of globalization that draws both states to the West risks being overwhelmed by policy differences with the West. Strengthened Sino-Russian ties are based on growing suspicions of the West, increasingly common interests, a natural arms sales relationship, and resolution of most of their Cold War ideological and border differences. Russian Prime Minister Primakov even conceives of a loose

Russian-Chinese-Indian alliance directed against Western dominance. At the same time rogue states like Iraq, Serbia, and North Korea are cooperating through technology transfers and tactics that try to thwart the market democracies. There are also indications of increased Russian and Chinese cooperation with the rogue states.

If a new polarization takes place in this sixth international system, the pattern of alignment that emerges might look similar to that of the Cold War, but this time it would be based more on interests than on ideology. It could be a schism between the technologically advanced haves (the market democracies) and have nots (the rest). The United States and its allies could face an informal coalition of Russia, China, and rogue states made more dangerous by the rogues' ties to these two major powers. Such a coalition might use the growing capabilities of transnational outlaws to attack U.S. interests at home without revealing fingerprints. This coalition might be more difficult to deal with and deter than our Cold War foes. It is not a future to encourage.

A new bipolar world is not inevitable. History need not repeat itself, but current trends are leading us in that direction. The first step in dealing with this potentially dangerous future is to recognize its possibility. Once that realization sets in, our statesmen can design policies that lead us to a more benign future and our military planners can begin to hedge against a more negative outcome.



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